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AUTHOR Hawkins, Thom
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ABSTRACT

A review of more than 100 student journals that are kept as part of the requirements of an education course that gives juniors and seniors academic credit for tutoring freshmen and sophomores in writing reveals that the tutors contribute to the development of writing abilities by providing the opportunity to use oral language in discursive intellectual discourse. Among the advantages of the program are that tutors, through personal contact and sharing of their own experiences, help younger students gain a perspective on the use of academic language and its influence in an "impersonal" academic environment: that tutors, through establishing a secure relationship with tutees, can insist that the students produce their own papers: that tutors, by sharing an undergraduate experience, can provide student writers with a receptive environment in which to verbalize--to think out loud--in dialogue that is relatively unrestricted: and that tutors have time to allow the students to work through the process of substantive revisions, rather than to hurry toward completion of a final product. (AEA)

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Intimacy and Audience:

The Relationship Between Revision and The Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring

by

Thom Hawkins
Student Learning Center
University of California
Berkeley, CA

Prepared for the 1979 MLA Annual Convention,
San Francisco, California

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Since 1973 the peer writing tutors at the Student Learning Center of the University of California, Berkeley, have handed me over 100 journals that are part of the required work in a course I teach. The course gives juniors and seniors academic credit from the School of Education for tutoring freshmen and sohomores who voluntarily come to our Writing Center to do extra work, with no additional credit, on papers they are preparing for their courses. As a group, these tutors have written approximately one and a half million words describing and analyzing their tutoring sessions with inexperienced student writers.

It is evident to any careful reader of these journals that the tutors are teaching something valuable about the nature of writing. In their entries, tutors often reflect on and assess how their involvement in the student's writing process contributes to the development of writing abilities. They feel that they are providing a vital link in the writing process, a link between writer and audience which is often missing when students write only for teachers. Tutors explain that the missing link is the opportunity to use oral language in discursive intellectual discourse, and that such discourse helps teach students the skills and judgment necessary to revise. It seems to me that tutors are particularly successful at engaging students in this discourse because of the intensely personal characteristics of the social contract between them and their students.

For instance, tutors write about how they become concerned, even preoccupied, with the welfare of their students, especially with the students' struggle to master academic language. Students attempt to mimic the faculty with what Richard Lanham (Revising Prose Scribner, New York, 1979) has dubbed "The School Style," but they confuse it with the "Official Style" of university administrators. Evasion, obfuscation, and redundancy pervade both the classroom and registration line. Thus, students come to perceive all academic language as inseparable from the bureaucracy itself. Tutors refer frequently to something they call "the system." To them the system is not just the academic establishment and its regulations, it is the set of intellectual standards used to measure student performance and, most important, it is the manipulation of language to enforce the standards. Knowledge is dispensed through the academy's language, and the academy protects its language from outsiders. A favorite word used to characterize this system is "impersonal." It is big, teachers are inaccessible, and the competition for grades is so fierce that students are atomized, cut off from each other, relating only to the center of power at the head of the classroom, just as they did in high school. The passivity they learned in high school is re-inforced three and four times over in a large university such as Berkeley. I would conjecture that in such an environment language is not seen as a neutral tool accessible to all. Rather, it becomes the instrument teachers sometimes use to intimidate students, to keep them at a distance; it is also the weapon students use against each other in the battle for grades.

Students want to have power over their environment, to be in control of what happens to them, and they sense that they must learn to manipulate language the way their teachers do before they will be

able to play the academic game the way the insiders do. But the system is "impersonal," so where do they start? A beginning tutor wrote, "Given a campus the size of Berkeley's, you've got to be aggressive in order to get any personal attention." The trouble is that aggressiveness fosters distance rather than closeness. Thus, the language of a beginning writer can hardly be anything more than a thin, distorted echo of official style if she lacks the confidence in her personal voice that comes from close contact with a receptive audience. Can there be real communication when a writer feels that the distance between him and his audience is so great that he is powerless to fill the gap? The distance is present in the competitive social atmosphere of the classrooms, but it is also there in the very language of academe, a language that many students view as some sort of secret code, decipherable only by the elite.

We all know that the combination of formal usage and standard English grammar is one of the hallmarks of the system's official communication code. To open up that code to inexperienced and insecure writers a tutor must use the unofficial closeness of the peer relationship:

> I'm trying to play it by the book while throwing out the book. Laying down the workings of grammar and trying to relax those workings at the same time. I want to stress the accessibility of these language skills, not grant them some kind of elitist status.

This tutor's technique is to break down the distance between persons, a distance students perceive as between language systems. Tutors step in and create a receptive audience, sometimes overcoming years of misguided effort:

> I'm trying to give my students some confidence with formal usage, yet I'm really working to play down the formal, because that seems to be where they've gotten stuck. It's the formality of academic English that hangs them up--when they try to approximate it on paper it comes out stilted.

Student writers try hard to control their language on paper, but they feel the language, like the system, is controlling them.

When peer writing tutors write in their journals about their students' sense of distance from the impersonal academic system and its language, they do not suggest that standards should be softened, that teachers should abandon grades or start talking like blue collar workers. They want standards, for themselves and for their students; they find that fair, consistent grading provides an essential measure of progress, and they want a language that can deal with the complex abstractions of argumentation and exposition. At issue is how these standards are exacted. In the past the system has been one-sided in its emphasis on competition. It has traditionally ignored a rich resource close at hand--the students themselves and their capacity for cooperative intellectual work within a community of learners.

In contrast to what tutors have to say about the "system," they write about the relationship between themselves and their students as "personal," not "impersonal"; as intimate, not distant; as involved, not detached. The tutoring contract is productive because there is a reciprocal relationship between equals, a sharing in the work of the system (i.e., writing papers) between two friends who trust one another. Tutors write at length about this special association:

> I learned that there is no such thing as learning in a vacuum, tutoring in a vacuum, and that tutees are human beings fully equipped with goals and fears, and not merely students with a particular academic problem.
>
> Intellectually, the student may not respond to tutoring, but I think an emotional response is unavoidable. Everyone wants to know someone cares about them. At Berkeley, it is particularly nice and unusual to find that someone is concerned about your academic results. . . . If someone keeps after you enough, maybe, just maybe, a trusting relationship will emerge, and the tutee will not only develop an obligation to his tutor, but an obligation to himself as well.

These testimonials imply that the social dimension of peer tutoring is precisely what allows the work to get done, particularly the work on written language. Tutors are secure enough to insist that students produce their own papers: "I lose all sympathy when the student refuses to think for himself." Tasks are accomplished because there is a mutual effort between friends, a situation of closeness, not distance, that fosters a sense of community in which the language learner can take risks without fear of penalty, can let his language become personal, not impersonal. One tutor writes: "I pursue two roles, instructor and friend, although I believe it is essential that I be sympathetic and reassuring so that my student will gain confidence." A friendship goes beyond the work, beyond the content of the paper, and lasts after "class" is out; hence, peer tutors lean toward being a friend. Tutors concentrate on the writing task, but unless they put intimacy together with work there is not a real intellectual community. This subtle, sometimes precarious, juggling of a dual role is a pedagogical stance unique to peer tutors. They are, afterall, the best equipped for such a role by merit of their student status and their accessibility.

A peer tutor, unlike a teacher, is still living the undergraduate experience. Thus, tutor and tutee are more likely to see each other as equals and to create an open, communicative atmosphere, even though the peer tutor is a more advanced student who has already gained a foothold in the system. The tutor's credibility as an "instructor" stems from the fact that he or she has already learned to compete successfully, something the tutee would like to do. The tutor is further along than the tutee, but both know that the tutor is not so far along to have forgotten what learning how to cope with

the system is like. He is, from the tutee's point of view, both an insider and an outsider. When working together they comprise a social structure that enables both to rehearse being insiders.

Peer tutors can provide student writers with generous amounts of time to verbalize--to think out loud--and the trusting personal relationship allows the dialogue to be relatively unrestricted. Compare that situation to the conference with an over-burdened teacher who can provide no regular, extended periods of one-to-one dialogue with students, and whose formal, critical dialogue must remain restricted because the writer knows he will be judged by the teacher who is, if she is doing her job, comparing the student to other members of the class. A tutor, in contrast, uses informal, congenial dialogue to guide students through the writing process, from pre-writing to revision to editing. Instructors rarely observe this entire process, let alone evaluate it. The nature of a classroom teacher's job is generally such that he can only examine and judge the <u>product</u> of a student's work, not the <u>process</u> the student uses to achieve that product. Good teachers give instruction in the process, but seldom can they monitor and evaluate it in the way a tutor can during regular weekly sessions of an hour or more with each student.

The trust and the relatively unhurried time together allow tutees to respond broadly to tutors' questions without fear of reprisal. No mistake, no blunder is irretrievable; they are not being graded. The truly discursive nature of the talk between tutor and tutee is, I would argue, at the heart of learning how to revise, how to refine thoughts from draft to draft. Students learn that revision is much more than mechanically correcting errors, that it is a recursive process concerned primarily with shaping ideas into suitable form. Tutors often write in their journals about how important it is to

build confidence in tutees so that they will have the courage and self-assurance it takes to make substantive revisions. They tell me that they build that confidence through talk, that it is the dialogue that teaches students how to argue, to analyze, to restate. Conversing with a peer tutor is, for many students, their only chance to thoroughly know the academic audience by talking at length to that audience in the language of that audience. They won't have the confidence to make changes, to revise, if they don't know what is expected of them.

I find that many students who come to our Writing Center don't know what the academic audience really wants. Professor Kenneth Bruffee has observed this same problem at the Brooklyn College Writing Center:

> . . . Many of the students who walked through the doors of the Writing Center, however many discrete bits of information they may have been able to check off reliably on multiple-choice examinations, did not really seem to know the subjects they studied when they were asked to write about them. Yet given the opportunity to talk with sympathetic peers, these same students seemed to discover knowledge they did not know they had. They could identify and examine issues in these subjects, take positions on them, and defend their positions in ways they (and some of their teachers) had not thought possible.
>
> ("The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Tutoring," Liberal Education 64: 447-468.)

Not until students have had sufficient experience talking with a sympathetic representative of their intended audience can they begin to develop the kind of intellectual judgment necessary to know how to benefit from criticism.

The students in our Writing Center are hungry for the information about what their audience is like and for the experience of being listened to and understood by that audience face to face. They need to observe the reactions and solicit the feedback of a potential reader while they tentatively shape what they know into

a form that will reach an academic audience. They must find out spontaneously if the receiver is getting the same message that is being sent. And as they rephrase their thoughts into alternate spoken statements, so too will they learn to revise their writing in a sequence of drafts, checking each draft with a reader--either teacher or tutor--until they have demonstrated that they have something to say and someone to say it to.